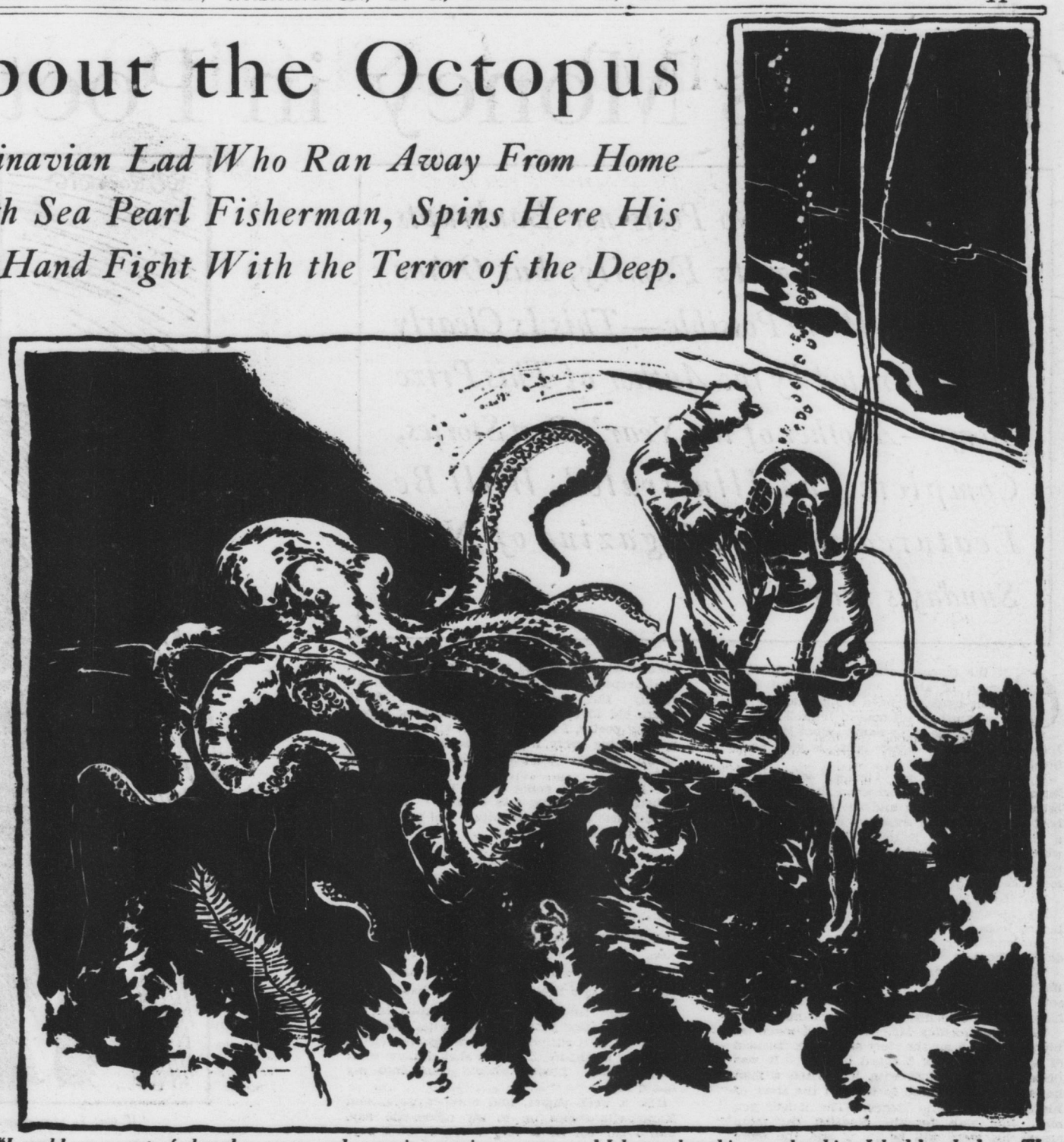
Truth About the Octopus

Victor Berge, a Scandinavian Lad Who Ran Away From Home and Became a South Sea Pearl Fisherman, Spins Here His Story of a Hand-to-Hand Fight With the Terror of the Deep.



"I could see a sort of shapeless mass, and wavering, squirmy arms, and I knew that this was the thing I had laughed at. The instant my hand would stretch down with the knife he'd give a terrific jerk, dragging me 10 or 15 feet."

"AMONG all the strange undersea creatures I've seen the octopus holds first place.

"Speaking as a diver—not as a seaman, or a whaler, or anything else—this is the most formidable monster of our working world. It is, without sensationalism, the Terror of the Deep.

"First of all, it has eight long arm-feet, coming off from around a hideous mouth, and these eight arms are just like eight boa constrictors all going at the same time, for their swift, flexible movements are precisely those of an active snake. When he stands up to the height of a man and oozes or darts forward, backward, sideways, any ways, these eight sinuous arms are all going at the same time; when he climbs swiftly up over a cliff like a spider, or creeps under an overhanging reef, every part of these eight arms is continually doing something.

"He is horribly, frighteningly alive. And then suddenly he'll stop—and be as horribly dead, turn to any color to match his background, no matter what, mimic the shapes about him, lying in wait for his prey.

"Under water one becomes accustomed to all sorts of startling color changes, but there's no animal in all the world who can equal the octopus in imitating anything. The fishes are amateurs beside him; he'll imitate pink, red, purple, blue coral—I've seen him break out with dark stripes. As you study him, you feel the Creator has given him everything."

IN these words, Victor Berge, a Swedish boy who ran away to sea, begins one of the most startling scientific adventure yarns ever spun by a sailor. Berge, who sailed in Hellships, stowed away, and drifted all over the Indian and South Pacific Oceans, finally became a pearl diver, and it was while hunting pearl oysters on the ocean floor that he encountered the octopus at home and fought him in his own back yard. Berge's story, "Pearl Diver," was set down by Henry Wysham Lanier, and has just been published by Doubleday, Doran & Co.

"This 'head-foot' mollusk," Diver Berge continues, in relating his story to Mr. Lanier, "has along the inside of each of his eight arms a double row of protruding suckers which, when it clamps them firmly against anything, form a vacuum and cling like a monstrous leech; and where these radiating lines of suckers meet, around his voracious belly mouth, there is a perfect mesh of similar gripping suction disks. Any prey forced by these loathsome, muscular, grasping arms into that pit of adhesiveness is held fast in the very jaws of destruction. For here gapes a great fleshy mouth, and, just within the opening a big, hooked beak like an overgrown parrot or toucan. This horny weapon can cut or tear to pieces soft flesh; it can rip open the shells of the crabs which seem to be a customary food.

"There is a tremendous force back of all this terrible mechanism; the octopus seems to gulp down whole living creatures, or big gobbets ripped out, and somehow get rid of the bones. The size of the mouthfuls he will take in is quite incredible unless one has actually watched him feeding.

"In addition to all this, masking his movements and for retreat or masking his defense, he possesses an ink sac.

"WHEN he wants to cover up his retreat and prepare for another attack, he can squirt out a cloud of this blue-black liquid laying his smoke screen for yards about, while he darts in among the rocks and creeps out for an unexpected assault.

"Personally, I'm convinced that the chief reason we know so little about him is that his true home is in the unexplored depths of 100 fathoms or more. We know just nothing from actual observation of 600-foot depths undersea. He lives down there, this giant octopus, and the only time he comes even to the shallows is during the breeding season. They are always in pairs when man comes in contact with them.

"The female, larger than the male, finds a quiet place, some deep crevice or lonely cavern, and lays long strings of eggs, like ropes with knots hanging there in the cavern. Both parents hang about until they hatch out, the whole process taking apparently a couple of months.

"The young octopi go straight to the surface, play around the rocks, lie along the beach; they seem to enjoy sunning themselves. When they are three or four months old they begin to seek the depths.

"I had listened to plenty of awed tales by natives and white men of this monster.

"At 19, with my own experience, day after day, on many pearl beds, my answer had always been, 'Rubbish!'

"THEN I got my first lesson.

"We were coming down from northeast Borneo to Macassar Strait. That is in my opinion the meanest, ugliest, most Godforsaken coast in the world, a succession of dirty rivers and swamps and reefs and real 'wild men of Borneo' and fevers. A ghastly country.

"We were just above the Equator, perhaps 40 miles north of Cape Manga-Tihat, when we sighted a couple of little islands. So we put in to get turtle—for that means eggs and fresh meat and tortoise shell to rovers of eastern seas.

"As is customary with every pearler, I was watching the sea floor. I noticed a number of patches here and there; they began to interest me.

"'Gee!' said I, 'it looks like shell here.'

"We grew excited; finding a new and virgin pearl bed is an adventure that never fails to get a pearler keyed up.

"'I'll go down and have a look-see,' I told Ro.

"GETTING into the suit, I started to explore thoroughly, gliding up and down over these patches, drifting along behind the lugger, straining my eyes for the first glimpse of the big pearl oysters.

"The water was fairly deep, about 20 fathoms, 120 feet. To one side of me there was an open space between masses of coral; I fancied I could distinguish something lying down there suspiciously like real shell. So I worked my

Pearl Diver Victor Berge.

way over those boulders down into this flat well.

"The object which had drawn me there seemed more than ever what I was seeking. I stooped to pick it up. And at that instant I felt something touch me quite lightly on the left arm.

"Instinct and under-water training saved my life. Quick as a flash, before I had the least notion of what it was, I whirled about, grabbing the razor-sharp knife from under my belt sheath and slashed three or four times with a full sweep of my arm in the direction of this touch. By luck, I severed two of the lassoing arms that were gripping me; in another instant the octopus would have had my two arms pinioned and I should have been helpless.

"As I slashed and felt the blade cut through a mass of soft flesh, two more arms laid hold of me, one around each ankle. I felt a vicious jerk at my legs which almost upset me.

"It all sounds melodramatic when one recounts it. Yet no description could paint the horror of that moment. It was rather murky, but I could see a sort of shapeless mass and wavering, squirmy arms—even one severed stump—ahead there by the rocks; and I knew only too well now that this was the thing which had produced those fearsome native tales I had poo-poohed. I had a swift picture of my companions above pulling up severed, dangling life line and air hose; of a human being that was myself, gripped close to the maw of this loathsome monster.

"MEANWHILE, I was fighting automatically. Each time I would bend to cut my ankles free the creature would jerk me so violently that I seemed to be a little boy pulled about by a strong man; it was with the greatest difficulty that I kept my footing. The helmet and breastplate banged against my head and chest with punishing force. The cold intelligence with which he appeared to anticipate my actions, and checkmate my every attempt, had a deep effect on my nervous resistance.

"It was life or death. My body and mind were working as if they had no relation to each other. One was straining, struggling, fighting against these shattering jerks, trying to cut, to stab, to free myself; the other, somewhere, was carefully weighing chances, attempting to decide whether I dared give the danger signal.

"That's the last thing a diver resorts to in an emergency—four pulls, meaning, 'Pull until the line breaks.' The emergency was there all right; but I feared my air pipe and life line might have become tangled in some of these coral projections all about. Should they be fouled such a strain from above might easily cut them off. A man working under the water always has those two lines of communication in his subconscious mind; it becomes automatic never to take action without making sure neither has been fouled. And little chance I had to check up on that.

"ALL this time our strange duel was continuing. I was using all my strength to resist the creature's pulls, while striving to cut more of these living fetters which bound me. All this in a pool now blackened and turbid with the ink the beast squirted out. After a while a current seemed to carry off some of the thickest discoloration.

"When I got a glimpse of that disgusting mass of arms and squirming legs, and especially one look into those diabolical eyes, I stretched up to give the danger signal. Instantly the octopus yanked me a dozen feet, and I had all I could manage not to just topple over.

"Apparently what I have been telling must have occupied about 10 to 15 minutes. At the time it was an eternity to me—there was nothing before or after this nightmare struggle. I began to realize I could not last much longer. It no longer seemed desperate to take a chance on the air hose being clear.

"All at once I knew I was going. Just before the wave of fear-frightened unconsciousness swept over me, I threw up my arms, caught both lines, gave four frantic pulls. There was an instant when I had the sensation of being pulled in two lengthways. Then I knew nothing.

"I shot suddenly up to within 10 or 15 feet of the surface. I do not know why, but it was at this moment I regained consciousness with a jerk.

"THE instant I was close enough to see what was the matter, Ro, the Tahitian native who was my helper, yelled at the men to pull hard. Deftly he got a stouter line about my body. Two more men caught this and hauled me upward.

"Ro slipped into the water, his big knife ready. In two sure slashes he had cut off those horrible arms.

"The two men hauled me to the surface, more dead than alive, with the pieces of suckered feelers still coiled about my legs.

"They got me on deck and took off my helmet. I looked, and felt, as if I had been through the worst fight of my life—blood all over my face and neck and shoulders, bruised from head to foot. My eyes closed. They thought for a moment I was dying.

"Some one ran for a glass of brandy and poured it down my throat. I opened my eyes and looked about.

"There they were, my three chums, standing about in the bright sunlight, with anxious faces. But they and the familiar lugger and all those things I knew so intimately looked quite strange. It must be that if a dead man could come back to life he would feel as I did then."

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Poor Pay for Farm Labor.

THE "hired man" was paid less than the private in the Army last year, and in addition was forced to buy his clothes out of the meager earnings that fell to his lot on the farms of the country. The average salary for the farm laborer was $32.29 last year, which was 75 cents less that during the preceding year. The room and board that went along with his pay was not an expensive proposition, apparently, for the average pay without these was $46.80, forty-four cents less than in the preceding year.

Farm wages increased during the first 10 months of the year, but a surplus of available labor, estimated at 15 per cent above the needs of the farms, caused a sharp decline during the last two months.